

## Managing Geocaches and Letterboxes on MassParks Properties

**Contacts:** Visitor Services, GIS Program,  
Ecology Program, Field Operations Team  
Leaders / Park Supervisors

**Goal** Manage location and volume of geocache placements in the parks; protect natural and cultural resources and promote public safety.



Geocaching is an activity by individuals or organizations who use GPS (Global Positioning Systems), compasses, and maps to find caches located in public spaces. The activity consists of placing caches and sharing the location of these caches on various geocaching websites, such as [www.geocaching.com](http://www.geocaching.com). Individuals can then use the location coordinates to find the caches. The activity can also be conducted without placing a physical cache by providing participants with GPS coordinates to find a specific location or feature within a park. Geocaching is an outdoor recreation activity that can lead visitors to new and enjoyable discoveries of the DCR park system, but must be conducted with oversight of the Department to ensure protection of cultural and natural resources.

Letterboxing is an activity that combines elements of orienteering and puzzle solving. Letterboxers hide small, weatherproof boxes in public spaces and distribute clues to find the box in printed catalogs, by word of mouth or via websites such as <http://letterboxing.org>, [www.geocaching.com](http://www.geocaching.com), or [www.atlasquest.com](http://www.atlasquest.com).

### Guidelines

#### General

- It is likely that most MassParks have geocaches on the property. There are over two million geocaches world wide. Geocachers use global positioning system (GPS) devices, including smart phones, to find hidden caches. Caches are in all different kinds of locations including tree crevices, between rocks and in or on structures.
- Geocaching.com assumes that the cache hider has obtained permission from the property owner, including the land managers in public lands. It also assumes that the geocache follows geocaching.com guidelines, <http://www.geocaching.com/about/guidelines.aspx>.
- Recently, Geocaching.com has been requesting official permission from MassParks staff for placement of caches on DCR property.
- Geocaches: Generally have two or more parts: a waterproof container, a logbook to list individuals who visit the cache, and sometimes a low-cost trinket or geocoin. Geocaches may have multiple locations or containers to find in order to locate the final Geocache container. Geocaches vary greatly in size and appearance. In the field you will see everything from large containers, to film canisters to a fake rock with a secret compartment.

## Reviewing Cache Locations, MassParks:

- Placement of caches needs to be reviewed by DCR staff to ensure natural and cultural resource protection and public safety. For purposes of MassParks, caches should be documented through the Recreational Use Permit process. The Department has a Recreational Use Permit and permitting process that is specifically designed for Geocaching: All Geocaching Permit requests must include mapping coordinates for the proposed cache. Requests will be received and processed by the Visitor Services Coordinator. The Coordinator will provide coordinates to the GIS Program & a determination will be made related to necessity for ecological review. Following this initial processing, the Coordinator will forward the information to the appropriate MassParks staff person to review proposed site location. The Geocaching / Letterboxing Recreational Use Permit will then be issued by MassParks Headquarters. Permittees will be required to include a permit authorization card with permit number and date in their cache.
- DCR intends to develop a web based application that will improve the efficiency of processing, review and approval of Geocaching Permits.
- Caches will be subject to the following conditions:
  - Permit authorization card must be included within the cache.
  - Must be placed adjacent to an existing and authorized trail (distance subject to Department discretion). In their description of the cache, the owner should recommend that trails be used as much as possible to locate the cache.
  - Must be transparent containers, e.g., Tupperware or Rubbermaid. Metal (ammo boxes), PVC pipes, or other non-transparent containers are prohibited.
  - No digging or excavation is permitted at any time in the placement or retrieval of a cache.<sup>1</sup>
  - No defacement or functional alteration to DCR property, including but not limited to signs, benches, buildings, or natural features is allowed.
  - No removal or damage of vegetation is permitted at any time in the placement or operation of a cache.
  - Caches shall not contain food, alcohol, firearms, drugs, dangerous items (e.g., fireworks, matches), commercial advertisements, or sexually explicit material. No natural or cultural materials from the park or facility shall be placed into the cache.
  - The number of caches permitted per individual or organization, and density of caches within a single property, will be subject to Department discretion.
  - Shall not be placed in or on:
    - Archaeological or cultural sites or sites that could potentially be historically significant as identified by the Department's Office of Cultural Resources (see Archaeological Features BMP). Such locations include cellar holes, structures, stone walls and wells.
    - Areas containing rare species habitat or priority natural communities, that are identified by the Department or by the Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program, as being highly sensitive to human activities.
    - Areas that could potentially cause danger to visitors trying to locate the cache.
    - Locations where cache-related foot traffic may create confusion, public safety concerns or impacts to significant ecological or cultural resources.
    - Underwater, caves or dens.<sup>2</sup>
    - Appalachian Trail Corridor<sup>3</sup>
    - Any restricted access area within the Quabbin Reservoir, Ware River, Wachusett Reservoir, and Sudbury Reservoir Watersheds.
    - Other locations that are deemed inappropriate by the facility manager, his/her designee, or the Department.
    - Traditional physical caches are not permitted in the Boston Harbor Islands State Park. However, the NPS has established an IslandCache Program to guide visitors to some of the park's more significant cultural, historical and natural resources ([see http://www.nps.gov/boha/planyourvisit/islandcache.htm](http://www.nps.gov/boha/planyourvisit/islandcache.htm)).

---

<sup>1</sup> See Rules of Conduct on DCR Properties (302 CMR:12.04: 12-23)

<sup>2</sup> See MGL Ch 6 Sect 179-180 & Ch 91 Sect 63

<sup>3</sup> Prohibited under policies outlined in the Appalachian Trail Corridor Cooperative Management Agreement between DCR, National Park Service, Appalachian Trail Conference, and Appalachian Mountain Club.

- With the help of Geocaching.com, DCR will bring existing caches into the Recreational Use Permit system. Owners of existing geocaches in the DCR park system will be given 5 months to apply for a Recreational Use Permit. If an existing cache is determined to pose a risk to park visitors or significant impact to natural or cultural resources the owner will be notified that the cache should be removed, relocated or adjusted related to contents / container.
- If there is no response from a cache owner during the 5-month period, DCR will open a 2-month adoption period during which an individual or a group, such as a Friends Group, could adopt a cache. 'Feature' caches that enhance DCR's mission would be permitted to remain. The remainder of unclaimed caches will be removed by park staff and the cache information removed from the Geocaching.com website.
- For parks that have Friends groups, members with geocaching experience can be encouraged to assist staff by locating geocaches and contacting the geocacher if there is a minor problem that needs to be corrected.
- **Caches must be removed by the geocacher at the end of the permitted period, unless a request for renewal is submitted by the cacher and approved by the DCR. Recreational Use Permits for geocaches must be renewed at the beginning of a calendar year if the geocache is to remain after two years.**